

Addressing Factors that Contribute to Indiscipline in Secondary Schools in Namibia: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The study examined factors that contribute to secondary school learner indiscipline in Namibia and ways how to mitigate them. We employed a qualitative case study design. The population comprised of all teachers and parents in the Khomas Region in Namibia. A stratified purposeful sampling was used to select the respondents. Standardized semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used to collect data. The findings of the study identified five categories of factors that contribute to indiscipline in secondary schools namely psychosocial factors, professional factors, learner performance, societal/environmental factors, and parental support. In order to mitigate the situation the study identified four strategies that could be employed in secondary schools, namely the point system, involving parents, counseling, and learner suspension and expulsion.

1. BACKGROUND

Prior to independence in 1990, discipline in the Namibian schools was enforced through the use of corporal punishment. This was prescribed in the Government Gazette of South West Africa (1973), as Namibia was then called. During that time the disciplinary rules made provision for corporal punishment to be administered by school principals and teachers on learners who committed serious misconduct. Parents and teachers believed that was acceptable for teachers to use corporal punishment on learners who misbehaved as the best way to effectively deal with indiscipline in schools in Namibia. In support of this observation, Zimba, Auala and Scott, (1998) argued that corporal punishment was considered an effective way of teaching learners the difference between right and wrong, and to foster discipline, respect, honesty and order and that it was acceptable if applied fairly and justifiably.

However, after independence of Namibia in 1990, this form of disciplinary measure was considered inhuman and was challenged (Ministry of Education, 1993). This was in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Verhellen, 2000) and Article 8 of the

Namibian Constitution that states that, "... no person shall be subjected to torture or the cruel inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1990, p. 70). In line with this constitutional provision, Judge Justice Ismael Mohammed of the Namibian Supreme Court ruled in April 1991 that corporal punishment inflicted on learners in Namibian schools was unlawful and constituted an invasion of their dignity and should be abolished. Thus, the use of corporal punishment in Namibian schools came to an end.

It is believed that as a result of Justice Ismael Mohammed's ruling of abolishing corporal punishment, there has been a rampant breakdown of discipline in Namibian schools especially in secondary schools (Zimba, Auala and Scott, 1998). Several reports have alluded to a number of issues such as: absenteeism without valid reasons; class-cutting and truancy; laziness; alcohol abuse; vandalism; theft of school properties; and wielding of dangerous weapons on school premises (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 1999; Hope, 1993; Zimba, Auala and Scott, 1998) as some of the challenges facing secondary schools in Namibia since learners have become unruly and uncontrollable. Some proponents of effective disciplinary measures in schools argue that, persistent and unbecoming learner behaviours in secondary schools are partly prompted by the misunderstanding of "human rights" on the part of learners (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 1999). Given this misunderstanding, many learners have misinterpreted their rights and freedom as passport to behave anyhow in the school environment without taking responsibilities for their actions as Hope (1993, p. 124) quoting Nahas Angula, the then Minister of Education in Namibia said "... indiscipline bordering on anarchy is slowly but surely creeping into many schools ...the nation is doomed to backwardness, ignorance ..."

The foregoing observation was correct since at present learner indiscipline has made teaching and learning in schools virtually impossible. In desperation, many parents and even some learners have called for the reintroduction of corporal punishment (Zimba, Auala & Scott, 1998), a disciplinary measure that is both unconstitutional and autocratic in nature. The proponents of corporal punishment put pressure on principals and teachers to reintroduce corporal punishment in schools, something the principals and teachers cannot do as they would contradict directly the country's supreme law, the Constitution. Notwithstanding the legal implications, it should be noted that learner indiscipline in many Namibian secondary schools has already adversely impacted on teaching and learning.

Albeit the situation was reported to be deteriorating the Ministry of Education has put policies and procedures in place to guide in addressing the situation. For example, Ministerial documents and policies such as *Code of Conduct for Namibian Schools* (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, 1990), *Discipline from Within* (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, 1992a), *Discipline with care* (Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, 1992b), *1995 The Year for the Improvement of*



Quality of Educational Outcomes (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1995) have been developed and distributed to schools. Principals and teachers are expected to effectively implement these policy documents in addressing learner indiscipline in schools. According to the *Code of Conduct for Namibian Schools* (1990) every learner must have respect for the rights and properties of their fellow learners, teachers and schools. Therefore, it is expected that learners should not disrupt teaching and learning. In the policy document entitled, *1995 The Year for the Improvement of Quality of Educational Outcomes* (Ministry of Education and Culture 1995) principals are expected to act as educational leaders and managers of schools, whose main obligations must include, among others, the submission of term reports on learner absenteeism, truancy and class-cutting. The directive further states that undisciplined learners should be dealt with severely. Severe disciplinary actions that can be taken against the culprits include charging them with misconduct, suspension, and expulsion (Ministry of Education, 2001).

Furthermore, principals are expected to be supportive, not punitive; and when dealing with learner indiscipline, they are expected to enable learners to develop self-discipline (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993). However, despite all these measures, learner indiscipline continue to worsen as observed in the Khomas education region, where this study was conducted (Windhoek Principals Schools Head Teachers Association, 2008). School principals in this region argue that although schools do have rules and regulations and guidelines, many secondary school learners do not take heed of these rules and regulations since there are no severe punishments that serve as a deterrent for offenders. Thus, learners do as they please, disregarding school rules and regulations especially those in secondary schools compared to those in primary schools in the Khomas education region (Centaurus High School, 2004; Namibia National Teachers Union, 2008; and Windhoek Principals Schools Head Teacher's Association Report, 2008).

Since the issue of learner indiscipline in schools in Namibia has become a major concern to teachers, parents and the public at large, a challenge has been posed to school management too. Unfortunately several studies that have been undertaken in this area that including Zimba et al. (1998) and Garagae (2007) had not specifically looked at the views of teachers and parents regarding factors that contribute to indiscipline in secondary schools, in the Khomas education region. Based on this gap in the available studies, the focus of this study was to undertake an in-depth investigation into factors that cause indiscipline in secondary schools in the region, by soliciting views from teachers and parents in an attempt to find ways in which the situation could be mitigated.

This study attempted to answer the following critical questions: 1) What are the factors that contribute to indiscipline in secondary schools? and; 2) What measures have secondary schools put in place to address the problem?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted the choice (control) theory developed by Glasser (1986). Glasser believes in fundamental human motivation which drives a person in a certain direction. The theory acknowledges the significant power of the need for motivating learners in schools through involving them in decision making about issues related to their discipline (Glasser, 1986). Lawson (2002, p. 2) is of the view that "... choice theory principles may be applied in schools by giving learners more responsibilities, opportunities to exercise freedom, explore, argue, take risks and make decisions about the matters to which they can contribute towards improving discipline in schools". The choice theory focuses on the issue of helping learners to develop personal responsibilities, thus shifting toward a higher level of internal locus of control and self-discipline. In their study on behavior and discipline in schools, Miller and Nash (2002, p. 10) suggest that educators employing the choice theory teach "...learners to satisfy their needs in appropriate and effective methods which may help decrease disruptive and destructive behavioural choices, and may increase behavioural choices that effectively satisfy their needs."

The control theory advocates that guidance and counseling are some of the important tools in helping learners to develop self-discipline. The study done by Ngandu, Ndhlovu and Phiri (2009) found that most learners in Zambia agreed that guidance and counseling helped them in choosing their right behaviour. According to this theory, learners should be empowered to explore ways of achieving self-actualization, self-confidence and self-enhancement (Glasser, 1986). Hence, a combination of motivation and counseling strategies for learners could be appropriate for working with difficult learners at school (Galvin, Miller and Nash, 2002). This theory assumes, therefore, that learners can be empowered to maintain self-discipline and enable them to choose out of their own free will to do what they think is good for them without disregarding the existing rules and regulations that guide such choices. The merit of applying the choice theory in the management of schools as argued by Glasser (1986) is that it has been found effective in reducing disciplinary problems and inappropriate behaviour in schools.

Arguably the most evident application of the choice theory in the Namibian education system is the Ministry of Education's introduction of Life Skills in schools in which learners are provided with guidance on how to make informed decisions for their own future choices. Most of the Life Skills teachers are teachers with counseling skills-who are tasked with providing counseling services to learners who have social and personal problems including disciplinary problems (Vergnani, Flank, Haihambo Ya-Otto & Mushaandja, 2010). Through counseling, learners are encouraged to take responsibilities of their own and peers' behaviour and learn to control themselves.

3. METHODOLOGY

To provide the most valid, accurate answers possible to the above-stated research questions, we adopted a qualitative case study design to solicit views of parents and teachers on the factors contributing to indiscipline among secondary school learners and how to address them. Qualitative research is naturalistic in nature, holistic and context-bound. We tried to understand the phenomenon without reducing it into variables of cause-effect relationships as in quantitative research. The phenomenon was interpreted from the Khomas education region's perspective. We examined the experience and realities of parents and teachers in the region on factors contributing to indiscipline in secondary schools. Thus, our aim was to understand the subjective views of teachers and parents regarding factors that contribute to learners' indiscipline in secondary schools and what could be done to address them.

Stratified purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample. A list of the secondary schools which improved learner discipline problems in the region was obtained from the Regional Education Office. The top three secondary schools were selected (schools A, B and C). The sample comprised of three strata – teachers, principals and parents. All strata were rich in information regarding learner discipline. From each of the three schools, we purposefully selected five teachers from those teachers who were directly dealing with disciplinary issues and who served in the school disciplinary committee. The three principals by virtue of them being managers of their schools were also selected. Apart from the teachers and principals, five parents/guardians (from each of the three schools) who were also randomly selected from members of the school board participated in the study. Thus, the sample comprised of 33 respondents. These respondents were well informed about discipline problems of the school since they were involved in addressing these issues on a daily basis.

Data were collected using standardized semi-structured/open-ended interview guide. Carefully and fully worded questions were prepared before the interview (Patton 2002). The respondents were asked the same questions in the same order. A standardized semi-structured interview guide ensured consistency across the respondents, reduced interviewer bias, and facilitated comparability during data analysis and, therefore, generalizability within the same context (Patton, 2002).

Document analysis was also used to extract relevant data to inform the items in the interview guide. Documents such as learner profiles and minutes of disciplinary committees, and policies documents were analyzed. Patton (2002) summarizes the importance of document analysis as follows: "Document ... analysis provides a behind-the-scene look at the program ... about which the interviewer might not ask appropriate questions without the leads provided through documents (p. 307)." In the same vein McMillan & Schumacher (1997) and Patton (2002) established that document analysis

is more effective if used together with other data collection instruments.

4. FINDINGS

Several findings that emanated from the results of the study addressed issues relating to factors that contributed to indiscipline in schools and ways how these factors could be mitigated.

4.1 *Factors contributing to indiscipline in schools*

Respondents were asked to state the factors that caused indiscipline in secondary schools. These were categorized as follows:

(a) Psychosocial factors

These are factors that affect learners psychologically or socially. Psychosocial factors included emotional and social problems such as stress, loss of parents and loved ones, depression, hormonal changes (e.g. during puberty), and too strict discipline are also the root causes of indiscipline in schools. The other subcategory of psychosocial factor highlighted by the respondents is poverty at home, which included lack of food and inability to afford school uniforms and other school necessities. Some learners faced problems at home that included abuse, alcoholism and neglect; negative experiences at school that range from a poor to absent teaching and non-conducive learning environment. Corporal punishment and bullying have forced some learners to display a range of negative behaviours, lack of motivation and alienation from the school system. It is plausible to argue that indiscipline in schools is triggered by an overlap of several psychological factors. One of the school principals from school A, commenting on poverty and hunger, said, "...if a learner comes to school with an empty stomach he or she is likely to disturb other learners and being restless in the classroom causes some kind of indiscipline".

(b) Professional factors

These refer to the ability of teachers and principals to help learners to behave and learn. An experienced teacher from one of the schools that participated in the study (school A) argued, "...an idle mind especially that of a child is the source of naughtiness [indiscipline]." Poor lesson preparations or no preparation at all is also a source of disciplinary problems. Further, the principal from school B said, "When teachers are not well prepared and do not conduct their lessons well and effectively, they are likely not to enhance the learners' positive attitude towards discipline at school." In addition, all respondents agreed that poor management of learner behavior is also a contributing factor. In reaction to lack of management strategies to address problems a principal from school C said, "... in schools where management lack strong learner discipline measures and clear plan of action, learners tend to do whatever they feel like, and this

increases indiscipline among learners in schools. The key to establishing good discipline at school lies in learners accepting the educators' authority to manage their behavior." This issues hinges on knowledge and training in the management of schools. Very few principals have adequate training in school management and this have resulted into serious disciplinary problems in schools in Namibia. Hence several educators have joined the call of re-introducing corporal punishment due to lack of alternative strategies to deal with learners' indiscipline.

(c) Learner performance

Respondents revealed that learner indiscipline is associated with learners whose performance is poor. Because of poor performance learners become frustrated and disturbed others. A teacher from school B indicated, "...make them [learners] winners and then you will have minimal disciplinary problems." The implication here is that if learners' performance is good, disciplinary problems would disappear.

(d) Societal factors /environmental factors

The findings of the study also revealed that indiscipline is brought about by different factors in a society such as peer pressure, cultural and home environment, shebeens and *cuca shops* (informal drinking places) in the vicinity of schools and homes. Several studies including Zimba et al. (1998) have alluded to shebeens within the vicinity of school environment as contributing factors to indiscipline in schools since learners spend much of their evenings in these outlets and others leave during class time to buy alcohol.

(e) Parental support

Teachers and principals that participated in the study felt that it was important to get the support of parents in disciplining learners. Some parents were willing to come to school to discuss the behaviour problems of their children. A teacher from school B said:

... some parents visit the school and make valuable suggestions on how to discipline learners. They know their children better than us teachers. Yes, there are those who take sides with their children. They never see anything wrong with their children. They love their children so much that they cannot even imagine their children are capable of doing something wrong. We only need to win their support by engaging them constantly.

Although there was positive response from parents on how to handle indiscipline in schools, finding permanent solutions is a challenge since some parents felt that the problem is not with their children but with school management. In the absence of parents taking responsibility, schools can only try their bit but addressing the issue effectively requires concerted efforts of all stakeholders (parents, teachers and learners).

4.2 How to address learner indiscipline in secondary schools

The findings show that there are several ways in which schools have attempted to deal with learner indiscipline in the Khomas education region. The very common method reported was reporting indiscipline learner to school management or school disciplinary committee. The common procedure of investigating, record keeping, and making recommendations and referring the learners either to the principal or teacher counselor have been employed by all schools that have participated in the study. The innovative methods were:

(a) The point system

It is a system that has been introduced to determine how fast or how many times a learner misbehaves. Points are allocated from one to fifteen points. Based on the points a learner accumulates, this will then determine whether a learner needs to see a teacher counselor or his or her behaviour problem is intense to the extent that parents should be called in or suspension should be considered.

(b) Involving parents

When the learners' behavior problem is intense, a principal may invite the parents of the misbehaving learners to school. The principal together with the parents decide on what actions to take against the learners. Actions included counseling, suspending and expelling misbehaving learners.

(c) Counseling

Teachers and principals refer learners who experience psychosocial problems to teacher counselors. Respondents indicated that the counseling system is effective, but face some challenges. Teacher counselors do not have enough time and appropriate venue to give counseling. The principal of school B summed up the challenges faced by teacher counselors: "... they do not have enough time to attend to the problems of learners. They have their full teaching load just like other teachers. However, they have the passion for this job".

(d) Suspending and expelling

A principal may suspend the misbehaving learners and ask them to come back to school after a period of time bringing along their parents. A teacher from school C said the following about the effectiveness of suspending and expelling learners from school, "... a significant number of learners are aware of the value of their education, therefore they do not want to miss their lessons due to suspension, let alone expulsion... Those who were suspended came back converted [behaving well]"



5. DISCUSSION

The study revealed the following categories of factors which contributed to indiscipline in secondary schools: psychosocial factors, professional factors, learner performance, societal/environmental factors, and parental support. There are subcategories under each of these five categories. Some of the factors or parts thereof require the intervention of the regional or national office, while a few could be addressed at the school level.

Secondary school learners face many and critical psychosocial problems including poverty and hunger. Because of poverty, parents are unable to afford basic necessities for their children. For example, learners come to school on empty stomach and without or with torn school uniforms. The Ministry of Education has a policy that learners should not be deterred from attending classes because they cannot afford to buy the school uniforms or pay school fees. They can be exempted from paying school fees. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education has a feeding programme for primary schools only. One wonders why the programme cannot be rolled out to secondary schools as well. The effect of hunger is the same for both primary and secondary school learners. Whether in primary or secondary school, a needy child is in need of food, which, if not provided, can cause disciplinary problems.

Professionals such as teachers, teacher counselors and principals need to be skillful in dealing with learner indiscipline. Counseling, as advocated by Galvin, Miller and Nash (1999) to be one of the effective strategies of addressing many of the above-mentioned disciplinary problems, is effective in the schools which participated in the study, but faces some challenges. Teacher counselors need enough time to give counseling; they also need appropriate venues for counseling, and incentives (they are not paid for this additional job). The findings of this study revealed that there are teachers and principals who apply appropriately the policies such as the *point system*, *discipline from within*, *discipline with care*, *suspension and expulsion*. Although corporal punishment is outlawed and it is a crime to administer it on learners it has found its way in the classroom as some teachers lack alternative methods to deal with learner indiscipline in secondary schools.

Poor learner performance was also identified as one category of sources of indiscipline in secondary schools. Poor performers become frustrated, lose hope and self-esteem and misbehavior is used as compensation for poor performance. Ignorantly, some teachers encourage this behavior by not rewarding and recognizing individual learner improvement, no matter how small it is. Recognition and reward help poor performers to gather courage, hope and self-esteem to continue trying to do their best in anticipation for more reward and recognition. An experienced teacher from school C said, “We teachers have a tendency of rewarding and encouraging gifted learners only forgetting to do the same for those who need encouragement and reward more – the

poor performers - many of whom may be less gifted ones. They should be rewarded when they have done their best no matter how insignificant it is." It is also plausible that some teacher reward mediocrity in order to lessen learner indiscipline and such actions just postponed the problem to later stage where such a learner will not be able to perform as expected and resort back to indiscipline.

Furthermore, the findings of the study also revealed that indiscipline is brought about by societal or environmental factors such as peer pressure, cultural and home environment, shebeens and *cuca shops* in the vicinity of the schools and homes. Some learners come from home environment where education is not valued. There is just nobody at home to tell the learner to do his or her homework and learn. Instead, as the principal of school B observed, "learners are ever 'partying' in shebeens and *cuca shops*. The mushrooming of these informal businesses [liquor outlets] in the vicinity of schools is also a source of learner indiscipline as some learners sneak out of school to go and abuse alcohol."

Lack of support from parents was another contributing factor. Some of the parents when invited to school, they do not turn up and, if they do, side with their children. They do not see anything wrong with their children as such learners exploit/ take advantage of the situation and tell parents how bad teachers are. As a result partnership between teachers and parents collapses and indiscipline increases to an alarming proportion. This situation in the long run fosters high failure rate in schools.

6. CONCLUSION

Namibia as a co-signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, therefore it abolished the use of corporal punishment. This action is seen by many in Namibia as promoting indiscipline in schools especially in secondary schools. Secondary school learners have become difficult to manage to the extent that sometimes the main business of schools – teaching and learning- is adversely affected. Many educators have pondered what the root causes of indiscipline are and how they can be addressed. This study was an attempt to identify some of the factors that contribute to indiscipline in schools and create a debate. The following factors were identified namely psychosocial factors, professional factors, learner performance, societal/environmental factors, and parental support. And the following strategies of mitigating learner indiscipline in secondary schools are suggested: the point system, involving parents, counseling, and suspending and expelling learners from school. It should be noted that these mitigating strategies are not exhaustive. Effective implementation of the Ministry of Education policies, regulations and procedures on learner discipline is a requirement above all other strategies that could be employed to arrest the situation.

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